



Notes on Burroughs (1964)

Tags: [Marshall McLuhan](#), [William Burroughs](#)

By Marshall McLuhan

1. Today men's nerves surround us; they have gone outside as electrical environment. The human nervous system itself can be reprogrammed biologically as readily as any radio network can alter its fare. Burroughs has dedicated *Naked Lunch* to the first proposition, and *Nova Express* (both Grove Press) to the second. *Naked Lunch* records private strategies of culture in the electric age. *Nova Express* indicates some of the "corporate" responses and adventures of the Subliminal Kid who is living in a universe which seems to be someone else's insides. Both books are a kind of engineer's report of the terrain hazards and mandatory processes, which exist in the new electric environment.

2. Burroughs uses what he calls "Brion Gysin's cut-up method which I call the fold-in method." To read the daily newspaper in its entirety is to encounter the method in all its purity. Similarly, an evening watching television programs is an experience in a corporate form — an endless succession of impressions and snatches of narrative. Burroughs is unique only in that he is attempting to reproduce in prose what we accommodate every day as a commonplace aspect of life in the electric age. If the corporate life is to be rendered on paper, the method of discontinuous nonstory must be employed.

3. That man provides the sexual organs of the technological world seems obvious enough to Burroughs, and such is the stage (or "biological theatre" as he calls it in *Nova Express*) for the series of social orgasms brought about by the evolutionary mutations of man and society. The logic, physical and emotional, of a world in which we have made our environment out of our own nervous systems, Burroughs follows everywhere to the peripheral orgasm of the cosmos.

4. Each technological extension involves an act of collective cannibalism. The previous environment with all its private and social values, is swallowed by the new environment and reprocessed for whatever values are digestible. Thus, Nature was succeeded by the mechanical environment and became what we call the "content" of the new industrial environment. That is, Nature became a vessel of aesthetic and spiritual values. Again and again the old environment is upgraded into an art form while the new conditions are regarded as corrupt and degrading. Artists, being experts in sensory awareness, tend to concentrate on the environmental as the challenging and dangerous situation. That is why they may seem to be "ahead of their time." Actually, they alone have the resources and temerity to live in immediate contact with the environment of their age. More timid people prefer to accept the content, the previous environment's values, as the continuing reality of their time. Our natural bias is to accept the new gimmick (automaton, say) as a thing that can be accommodated in the old ethical order.

5. During the process of digestion of the old environment, man finds it expedient to anesthetize himself as much as possible. He pays as little attention to the action of the environment as the patient heeds the surgeon's scalpel. The gulping or swallowing of Nature by the machine was attended by a complete change of the ground rules of both the sensory ratios of the individual nervous system and the patterns of the social order as well. Today, when the environment has become the extension of the entire mesh of the nervous system, anesthesia numbs our bodies into hydraulic jacks.

6. Burroughs disdains the hallucinatory drugs as providing mere "content," the fantasies, dreams that money can buy. Junk (heroin) is needed to turn the human body itself into an environment that

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includes the universe. The central theme of *Naked Lunch* is the strategy of bypassing the new electric environment by becoming an environment oneself. The moment one achieves this environmental state all things and people are submitted to you to be processed. Whether a man takes the road of junk or the road of art, the entire world must submit to his processing. The world becomes his “content.” He programs the sensory order.

7. For artists and philosophers, when a technology is new it yields Utopias. Such is Plato’s *Republic* in the fifth century B.C., when phonetic writing was being established. Similarly, More’s *Utopia* is written in the sixteenth century when the printed book had just become established. When electric technology was new and speculative, *Alice in Wonderland* came as a kind of non-Euclidean space-time Utopia, a grown-up version of which is the *Illuminations* of Rimbaud. Like Lewis Carroll, Rimbaud accepts each object as a world and the world as an object. He makes a complete break with the established procedure of putting things *into* time or space:

That’s she, the little girl behind the rose bushes, and she’s dead. The young mother, also dead, is coming down the steps. The cousin’s carriage crunches the sand. The small brother (he’s in India!) over there in the field of pinks, in front of the sunset. The old men they’ve buried upright in the wall covered with gilly-flowers.

But when the full consequences of each new technology have been manifested in new psychic and social forms, then the anti-Utopias appear. *Naked Lunch* can be viewed as the anti-Utopia of *Illuminations*:

During the withdrawal the addict is acutely aware of his surroundings. Sense impressions are sharpened to the point of hallucination. Familiar objects seem to stir with a writhing furtive life. The addict is subject to a barrage of sensations external and visceral.

Or to give a concrete example from the symbolist landscape of *Naked Lunch*:

A guard in a uniform of human skin, black buck jacket with carious yellow teeth buttons, an elastic pullover shirt in burnished Indian copper [...] sandals from calloused foot soles of young Malayan farmer [...]

The key to symbolist perception is in yielding the permission to objects to resonate with their *own* time and space. Time and space themselves are subjected to the uniform and continuous visual processing that provides us with the “connected and rational” world that is in fact only an isolated fragment of reality — the visual. There is no uniform and continuous character in the nonvisual modalities of space and time. The Symbolists freed themselves from visual conditions into the visionary world of the iconic and the auditory. Their art, to be visually oriented and literary man, seems haunted, magical and often incomprehensible. It is, in John Ruskin’s words:

... the expression, in a moment, by a series of symbols thrown together in bold and fearless connections; of truths which it would have taken a long time to express in any verbal way, and of which the connection is left for the beholder to work out for himself; the gaps, left or overleaped by the haste of the imagination, forming the grotesque character. (*Modern Painters*)

The art of the interval, rather than the art of the connection, is not only medieval but Oriental; above all, it is the art mode of instant electric culture.

8. There are considerable antecedents for the Burroughs attempt to read the language of the biological theatre and the motives of the Subliminal Kid. **Fleurs du Mal** is a vision of the city as the technological extension of man. Baudelaire had once intended to title the book *Les Limbes*. The vision of the city as a physiological and psychic extension of the body he experienced as a nightmare of illness and self-alienation. Wyndham Lewis, in his trilogy *The Human Age*, began with *The Childermass*. Its theme is the massacre of innocents and the rape of entire populations by the popular media of press and film. Later in *The Human Age* Lewis explores the psychic mutations of man living in “the magnetic city,” the instant, electric, and angelic (or diabolic) culture. Lewis views the action in a much more inclusive way than Burroughs whose world is a paradigm of a future in which there can be no spectators but only participants. All men are totally involved in the insides of all men. There is no privacy and no private parts. In a world in which we are all ingesting and digesting one another there can be no obscenity or pornography or decency. Such is the law of electric media which stretch the nerves to form a global membrane of enclosure.

9. The Burroughs diagnosis is that we can avoid the inevitable “closure” that accompanies each new technology by regarding our entire gadgetry as *junk*. Man has hopped himself up by a long series of technological fixes:

You are all dogs on tape. The entire planet is being developed into terminal identity and complete surrender.

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We can forego the entire legacy of Cain (the inventor of gadgets) by applying the same formula that works for *junk* — “apomorphine,” extended to all technology:

Apomorphine is no word and no image — [...] It is simply a question of putting through an inoculation program in the very limited time that remains — Word begets image and image IS virus —

Burroughs is arguing that the power of the image to beget image, and of technology to reproduce itself via human intervention, is utterly in excess of our power to control the psychic and social consequences:

Shut the whole thing right off — *Silence* — When you answer the machine you provide it with more recordings to be played back to your “enemies” keep the whole nova machine running — The Chinese character for “enemy” means to be similar to or to answer — Don’t answer the machine — Shut it off —

Merely to be in the presence of any machine, or replica of our body or faculties, is to be close with it. Our sensory ratios shift at once with each encounter with any fragmented extension of our being. This is a non-stop express of innovation that cannot be endured indefinitely:

We are just dust falls from demagnetized patterns — Show business —

It is the medium that is the message because the medium creates an environment that is as indelible as it is lethal. To end the proliferation of lethal new environmental expression, Burroughs urges a huge collective act of restraint as well as a nonclosure of sensory modes — “The biological theater of the body can bear a good deal of new program notes.”

10. *Finnegans Wake* provides the closest literary precedent to Burroughs’ work. From the beginning to end it is occupied with the theme of “the extensions” of man — weaponry, clothing, languages, number, money, and media *in toto*. Joyce works out in detail the sensory shifts involved in each extension of man, and concludes with the resounding boast:

The keys to. Given!

Like Burroughs, Joyce was sure he had worked out the formula for total cultural understanding and control. The idea of art as total programming for the environment is tribal, mental, Egyptian. It is, also, an idea of art to which electric technology leads quite strongly. We live science fiction. The bomb is our environment. The bomb is of higher learning all compact, the extension division of the university. The university has become a global environment. The university now contains the commercial world, as well as the military and government establishments. To reprogram the cultures of the globe becomes as natural an undertaking as curriculum revision in a university. Since new media are new environments that reprocess psyche and society in successive ways, why not bypass instruction in fragmented subjects meant for fragmented sections of the society and reprogram the environment itself? Such is Burroughs’ vision.

11. It is amusing to read reviews of Burroughs that try to classify his books as nonbooks or as failed science fiction. It is a little like trying to criticize the sartorial and verbal manifestations of a man who is knocking on the door to explain that flames are leaping from the roof of our home. Burroughs is not asking merit marks as a writer; he is trying to point to the shut-on button of an active and lethal environmental process.

This oft-quoted text first appeared in the *Nation*, 28 December 1964, pp 517-519.

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Lubin

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9:57 pm

Burroughs, McLuhan & Wyndham Lewis.
If you only know of the first two... check out ‘The Art of being Ruled’ or ‘The Lion and the Fox.’
May very well be the ‘Intellectual Father’ of WSB.
(Most definitely influenced McLuhan).

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